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State eyes Sykesville for horse retirement farm

Inmates would attend classes to care for equine

by Charles Schelle | Staff Writer

Some inmates at the Central Laundry Facility in Sykesville could add caring for horses to their list of skills if a state initiative goes through. Gary Maynard, secretary of the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, has proposed placing a 70-acre retired horse farm in Sykesville, using inmates to construct it and take care of the horses.

The project would be located on a former farm on state-owned property off of Slacks Road in Sykesville, between the Maryland State Police Training Commission's driving course and the Central Laundry Facility minimum security jail, which takes care of laundry from state hospitals and other jails from around the state. Inmates would build and prepare the farm and take care of retired race horses, preparing them for adoption, Maynard said.

A contract with Saratoga Springs, N.Y.-based Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation is near completion. Work could start by late fall, said Maynard, who helped establish the foundation's farms in Iowa and South Carolina. "It's always good for the inmates, good for thoroughbred owners and good for the horses," he said about the program.

Another horse farm is proposed for Salisbury's Eastern Correctional Institution, he said, but the state still needs land for that project.

One of the program goals would be to make inmates at the Sykesville jail, who would be ready to be released, more employable by teaching them skills, he added.

The thoroughbred foundation would provide some operating money and would manage the farm, said Diana Pikulski, foundation executive director.

The arrangement could benefit the horses and the inmates.

"Horses are particularly useful in teaching anger management to reduce incidents of bullying, to help people with substance abuse issues because when you work around horses, horses reflect what your body is reflecting in terms of emotions," she said. "So, if you're angry or you're stressed in some way, you're not able to communicate what you need to get done with your horse."

The foundation helps operate seven similar farms in six states. The Sykesville farm would be one of the largest the foundation operates and could hold 50 to 60 horses, she said.

The foundation pays for horse care, including food, medicine and veterinarian bills and also provides experts to teach classes to the inmates to learn the skills, she said. The state would provide inmate labor, land, water, power and supervisors to oversee the inmates, she added.

It costs about \$3 to \$4 to house and take care of one horse, per day, she said. The classes and teachers would cost \$15,000 to \$20,000 per year, she said.

The state does not have costs available yet for repairing a barn as well as other costs it would incur for the project.

An inmate's typical day would include feeding horses, checking on their health, giving the horses any necessary medications, grooming, cleaning stalls and attending classes, she said. The fact that the Sykesville property has grassland and former farm buildings would provide an easy transition, she said. If approved, it could take weeks to set up the farm, she added; however, it could take longer depending on how much repair the buildings need.

Maynard said he is not sure how much work would have to be done on the barn, but he aims to use donated materials from around Maryland.

"Being in Maryland has many positives," Pikulski said. "It is a racing state, has a long history in racing and a lot of racing activity."

Maynard said he would like to approach Pimlico race track in Baltimore, where the Preakness is held every year, to partner in some way with the program.

The foundation is also in the process of documenting how women and men working at the farms have had less behavioral problems while at the jails, she said.

Maynard is also considering a demonstration honor guard using the horses to show how police departments can adopt and use the horses. Also some police departments in the state still have mounted patrols, where they could use the horses, he added.